

NINE RABBITS
EXCERPTS FROM PART ONE
by Virginia Zaharieva

translated from the Bulgarian by Angela Rodel

Dresses

I appeared in Nesebar – an inconvenient four-year-old grandchild, just when my grandmother was raising the last two of her six children, putting the finishing touches on the house, ordering the workmen around, doing some of the construction work herself and thank God for that, because at least it used up some of her monstrous energy – otherwise who knows would've become of me.

Klement and Maruna – they were the runts of the litter – were rarely at home, since they went to boarding schools in Burgas. My aunt studied agriculture, while my uncle was at the nautical school.

Whenever I disappeared for long stretches somewhere inside the house, you could bet that I was in the attic, where there were a dozen big chests full of shoes, dresses and all sorts of things brought from Czechoslovakia, where the family had prospered. Grandma Nikula and Grandpa Boris – “the Czechs,” as they were called – had worked in glass factories in Bohemia between 1948 and 1958 – right during the most optimistic years of the Klement Gottwald regime.

Nikula had an eye for materials and colors. Her father had been a cloth trader. In Czechoslovakia she had sewn dresses for herself and her daughters and even managed to marry off her oldest girl in Prague at the age of eighteen.

Nikula truly did dress with taste – although now only when we went to the movies or when she stumped for the Fatherland Front in the nearby villages.

She took me with her, where could she leave me? I stood in front of the podium and watched her. She was very beautiful and convincing, my grandmother, when she got up in front of the masses. I was proud of her: she always managed to slip in something from her own heroic biography that made her speech entertaining. For example, how when she was eight months pregnant with my uncle she helped build the Hainboaz Pass and was a shock-worker despite her huge belly.

Now, absorbed in building the house, she didn't have the time or occasion to parade around in her dresses. So they all belonged to me.

The attic was plastered with a mixture of sheep manure, fine straw and dark red clay. A whiff of dingleberries and dust accompanied my odysseys through 1950s fashion in front of a large cracked mirror, lit up by the one skylight in the roof. I first put on a black satin slip with lace trim. Then I added white silk petticoats. Next came the colorful flowered dresses, tailored at the waist, flared at the bottom, with straps, backless or with plunging necklines. Trembling, I would try them on one by one. The shoes had solid heels, open backs and another little opening at the tip of the toes. I climbed up onto the high heels. I was beautiful. Thus dolled up, I would spend hours enraptured by the family treasures. Once I even found a

pistol. I showed it to Ruffi, my friend from next door, and then hid it again in a different spot. Grandma and grandpa fought a lot and I was afraid that they'd end up shooting each other some evening.

I shared the attic with giant nesting seagulls who yielded their territory to me with a squawk. At that time I hadn't yet seen Hitchcock's *The Birds* and so I studied the eggs in the nest without a thought for the mother lurking outside. During some important surveillance mission, I would hear my grandma's raspy voice: "Where are you, girl... Saraaa, Pepaaa, Marunaaa, Klemooo, Ivaaaan, Veraaa..." And then, once she'd finished reeling off the names of her children, completely furious, she'd hit upon my name and bark, "Mandaaaa, Imgonnatanyerhide, get down from there this instaaaant..." Sometimes I thought my name was Imgonnatanyerhide ... "How many times have I told you not to rummage around in the attic," her voice echoed in the shaft leading to the attic. It was a difficult place to climb up to. I counted on this while hiding among the chests, but sometimes she was so mad that she'd climb up the ladder huffing and puffing. A wild chase around the rafters in the attic would ensue. "You little turd!" and "brat!" were her war cries. At first it was fun, but the fun soon ended. She would beat me with whatever was at hand – a belt, a hanger or an umbrella – and then she'd collapse exhausted onto some heap of clothing while I quickly escaped outside. I would come back late hoping she would be asleep, but she would be lurking by the door to smack me again. This time for good night.

Baked Rabbit

I liked my Uncle Klemo much better than my Aunt Maruna, because she really annoyed me. Klemo took after grandpa, he'd inherited his blue eyes and he and my mom were a team. When he and Maruna came back on the weekends from the boarding school in Burgas, we'd go to the movies. Not that there was any great selection – they always showed *Mr. Pitkin 1 and 2*. It was a comedy and the only part I remember was the scene where Mr. Pitkin dressed up as a nurse and tried to walk in high heels. Dressed up in my mother's nursing coat and her shoes – she wore size 41 clodhoppers – my uncle would imitate that scene so brilliantly that we'd be rolling on the ground, stomping our feet and peeing ourselves with laughter. Grandma, too. It was funnier than in the film.

At that time Klemo and Maruna had just taken up smoking and when they came back home they would sneak cigarettes in the cornflowers at the far end of the yard near my turtles. I kept their secret, but blackmailed them into buying me candied fruit. One time Rufi and I found a kitten and secretly kept it up in the attic because grandma didn't want us coddling any animals inside the house – she'd had enough with my grandpa's stupid wolfhounds. I showed it to my uncle, and he grew silent and angry. He told me to forget about the kitten and took it away to Burgas. There was no one I could complain to. But he made me so mad that I tattled on him to grandma for smoking. God, all hell broke loose the next time he came home. The whole house shook with their stomping, laughter and shouts. Grandma chased him with dustpan. You could hear the dull ringing of the metal hitting bone. Klemo howled, while Nikula's voice pierced through the din:

“You worthless brat, yesterday's turd – so you're smoking on me, are you? Just like that rascal your father! I raised you from a mere slab of flesh,” she lay into him, “and now you're gonna poison yourself. Once you're earning your own money, go ahead and buy shit for all I care, but don't you dare buy tobacco with my money!”

I listened to the uproar with satisfaction, since for once somebody besides me was getting a thrashing, but I soon felt sorry for my uncle and started getting scared, because it was dangerous to unleash Nikula's fury. I had just breathed a sigh of relief that the attack seem to be tapering off when the dustpan came down hard on my back.

“Whyyyyyy???” I screamed as I writhed that her feet.

“So you learn not to tattle, you worthless little brat,” and thus my grandmother concluded our lesson for that evening and disappeared behind the curtain by the kitchen sink, where she rattled the dishes around for quite some time. She blew off steam with cleaning after such campaigns.

After a week I made up with my uncle. I apologized for ratting him out and he told me the following story: Once in Czechoslovakia after many unsuccessful attempts, he finally managed to sweet-talk Nikula into letting them adopt two small kittens. They named them Topsy and Mopsy. They soon grew into magnificent cats, everybody's darlings, but especially Nikula's. They adored her and would wallow in her lap for hours in the evening. For Christmas the family slaughtered a pig, made sausages and put them in the cellar to ripen. Somebody left the cellar door open and Topsy and Mopsy snuck in, ate up whatever they could, chewed on the rest and then escaped. Nikula discovered the damage. She didn't say anything, which wasn't a good sign. She threw away the remains of the sausage and rattled around the kitchen, sunk in a deep silence. Topsy and Mopsy were nowhere to be seen. The next day the whole family gathered for

dinner. The delicious scents of sweets and stew wafted from the kitchen: baked rabbit and apricot dumplings.

This fragrant dinner lightened up the gloomy atmosphere of the preceding days. They ate and drank and at one point Boris asked:

“Well now, woman, where are Topsy and Mopsy?”

“How should I know? They ran away, like the devil’s spawn they are! How could they dare come back now?” My grandma replied angrily.

Boris pushed the food around on his plate and set down his fork. The children followed him closely with their eyes.

All at once the whole gang realized what had happened and rushed outside en masse to throw up in the yard. They went to bed hungry. The next day they had dumplings for breakfast and slunk away silently.

Grandma tossed out the panful of “rabbits,” but a month later she appeared in a leather vest, lined with fur on the inside, since of course cat-fur vests work wonders for a sore lower back.

“You know her favorite cat-fur vest? The one she never parts with?” Klemo finished off his story.

How could I not know it – I had even worn it myself.

“So now do you see why I let the kitten go?”

“Yes.”

And now they try to give me their Hollywood *Addams Family*.

What a joke!

Potato Dumplings with Fruit:

Boil the potatoes in the evening and on the next day peel them and grate them using a fine grater. Add two eggs, flour and a bit of semolina to make a dough that won't stick to your hands. Form it into small balls wrapped around the pitted fruit. Bring salted water to a boil, then stretch cheesecloth across the pot and secure it with an elastic band. Place four to five dumplings on top of the cheesecloth and cover with a lid. Steam the dumplings for 20-25 minutes. Dissolve cinnamon and sugar in butter and pour the sauce over the finished dumplings or add poppy seeds and sugar to the butter, as desired.

Dumplings with Yeast:

1 packet of dry yeast, 1 cup of flour, 1 cup of semolina, 1/4 liter of milk, 1 egg, and 1 Tbsp. sugar
Mix yeast, sugar, several spoonfuls of warm milk plus one to two spoonfuls of flour and set aside to allow the mixture to rise. Once it rises, add the remaining flour and semolina. Stir the egg and a pinch of salt into the remaining milk and add it as well. Knead the stiff dough and leave it to rise for an hour. Knead it again and shape it into a long loaf. Cut it into three or four pieces like small rolls. Wrap them in a clean towel and let them rise for 20 minutes. Drop them into boiling salted water and let them cook for five minutes covered with a lid. Then remove the lid, flip the dumplings over and finish boiling them in an open pot for five more minutes. After removing them from the pot, pierce the boiled dumplings in several places. Cut them into slices with a strong thread. Serve them with roasted meat, gravy and oven-baked

cabbage. As with the potato dumplings, you can wrap fruit in the dough and drizzle it with butter, sugar and cinnamon or poppy seeds.

Cherry Stain

At the far end of the yard next to the brick wall of the neighboring house there is a ripe cherry tree. It grows on the border of our yards, so each family picks it from their side.

Today I'm wearing a dress. A white one. From my grandma Vera in Sofia.

Stretched out on a thick branch, Rufi is eating cherries and spitting the pits at the neighbor's cat and pretending not to see me.

"All black cats should be destroyed... Especially this one, 'cause it eats our cherries."

"Gimme one."

"Did you see that? It went straight into its ear."

"Gimme a cherry."

"Here."

"That's not a cherry."

"It's a little pear. Check it out... It's silver."

"It's just a regular old light bulb for a lamp."

"This is no regular light bulb... If I drop it, it'll explode... And the whole world will die."

"You're lying..."

"OK, then I'll drop it."

"C'mon, don't."

Rufi slowly climbed down out of the tree with the light bulb in his mouth.

"It's just a lie, right? So why don't I just whack it a bit and we'll see whether everyone dies."

"Everyone who?"

"Well, your grandpa, your grandma, everybody..."

"And me?"

"And you."

Silence.

He wiggles a brick out of the wall. I'm watching the light bulb.

"The world's not inside."

"No? Then how does it get inside the television?" (His cousin had a television!)

"And will you die, too?"

"I'll be the only one left."

"Why?"

"Why?... Because I was the first one to find it..."

Silence.

"You're a jerk."

"OK, fine then..."

Rufi raises his arms as if to strike. I kick him. We go rolling onto the ground. He shoves me towards the wall, grabs the brick and holds it over the light bulb again.

Above us, the cat, its paw hanging forgotten in mid-air, wonders why these two creatures aren't moving anymore. The wind tugs at my dress. In the silence only the sound of overripe cherries hitting the ground can be heard.

"I'm letting it go now."

Silence.

"It's your own fault."

"Don't, please."

"There's no use in begging."

"C'mon, please..."

"OK, OK, since you're that upset, I won't... Buuuuut in that case...."

"But what?"

"You have to take off your panties."

Silence.

"No."

"Look, I just have to move this little finger and the brick falls..."

"No, no!"

"I won't tell anybody."

"No, I don't want to."

"OK, well in that case..."

He slowly lifts the brick. I hurl myself on top of him. There's a crunch and a scream.

We lay there clutching at each other. I can't tell whether we're both dead or whether we're alive and if we're alive, whether the others are dead... An ant crawls over Rufi's leg. The cat carefully jumps down. Someone has scribbled across the sky with chalk.

"Mandaaa, Mandaaa... Where are you, girl?" Nikula's voice comes calling.

"Mandaaaimgonnatanyerhide..."

"Grandma!"

I'm running and bawling.

"Wait a second!" Rufi shouts after me.

"No!"

"Mandaaa, please! At least let me kiss you!"

"No way!"

"On the cheek!"

"Grandma won't stand for it! I'll tell her... everything!"

"See if I care, you little shit! Just you tell her... and I'll burn your whole house down! I'll kill your garden gnomes! I'll shoot your dogs..."

I slam the garden gate and bolt it.

"God almighty, just take a look at yourself... Why are you bawling!" Nikula looms above me frightening and solid.

Silence.

"Blood! What's this blood here?"

She points at a large stain on my dress.

"Grandma... I... I... saved the world from dying."

"Oh, go on inside and take it off so I can wash it. There's no point in putting a dress on you again."

Nettles

Otherwise the summer rolled on freely and easily. Mama came home from her job at the sanatorium less and less often. Maruna and Klement were on the school work brigades. They were picking peppers and tomatoes in the fields around Aitos. On his bike or in his dog buggy, Grandpa flew between the hotel, the pigsty and the monastery, while grandma finished up the interior of the house's top floor – which didn't stop her from renting out two rooms on the second floor and even the cellar. Czech girls smelling of suntan lotion picked their way through the plaster, nails and construction debris on their high heels, and in the evening, when they didn't go out dancing at the restaurants, they'd listen to my grandma's life story, sitting under our fig tree with homemade brandy and fresh tomatoes, wearing concerned expressions and clucking their tongues in sympathy.

Once my grandma rented out our cellar room to two Czech girls, so we had to sleep under the porch where there wasn't even a window. Right from the very beginning I didn't like them. They looked down on me and rattled on in their language, thinking I couldn't understand them. I heard one of them say that I was a dirty little Gypsy and that our house was totally disgusting. Another time one of them kicked the little house I'd made for the hedgehog – the newest resident of my garden – out of her way as she passed by and then laughed as I scrambled to pick up the pieces. I swore to get revenge. Who cares if she was so much older than me? The stupid cow.

Rufi and I often went swimming in the Devil's River where it ran into the sea. We'd catch little water snakes there and play with them. They were rubbery, dry and fascinating. When we'd had enough of them, we would let them go back into the water. That day while I was telling Rufi about the new Czech girls, all of a sudden a brilliant plan for revenge dawned on me. All day we gathered up water snakes. We filled up two jam jars. Rufi also insisted that we arm ourselves with another jarful of green grasshoppers just in case. In the afternoon, while the Czechs were at the beach, we snuck into their room, opened up the jars and quickly slipped back out. Then we quietly began crafting a door for our wood fort in the yard, waiting for the Czechs to return. We didn't want to miss the show. They eventually turned up in all their sweaty glory, stuffed into their skimpy beach dresses, clucking "Ahoy, ahoy!" Then they disappeared into the cool basement. We pricked up our ears in the direction of the little window covered with a screen to keep out the mosquitoes. For now all was silent.

"Maybe they didn't come out of the jars or they died from their perfume," Rufi suggested.

We could hear the splashing of the water in the bathroom and their cheerful chattering. Then out of the darkness of their room we heard the sound of creaking springs – they'd laid down on the bed, tired out from the beach. Even though Nikula forbid me from entering the guests' rooms, I'd frequently succumbed to the temptation of looking through their things.

"Their room is such a pigsty that they must've gotten lost," I guessed.

At that moment unearthly screams erupted down below. We were so startled that we dropped our tools and hurled ourselves at the mosquito screen.

"Jeeeeeesus, Maaaaary and Jooooooseph!" they screamed and threw everything they could get their hands on.

One of them was screaming bloody murder and hopping up and down. The whole room was writhing, the little snakes were swarming out of the shoes on the floor. Years later Spielberg would steal our idea in a similar scene with Indiana Jones and his girlfriend in the bowels of a pyramid. The Czechs tried to defend themselves with towels. The next second, however, they realized what a losing battle this was and came running out into the yard, tossing away their bras and panties as snakes and grasshoppers came flying out of them. They ended up out in the street buck naked.

It was a hilarious sight. The workmen had come out and were doubled over with laughter. Nikula, too – until she realized what was going on. It was just the time when everyone was coming back from the beach and the two Czech girls found themselves starkers in the middle of the crowd returning from the south beach. They pointed at the house and with pale faces babbled incoherently. A crowd immediately gathered. Someone gave them beach towels to cover up with, and concerned Czechs immediately rushed towards my grandmother. Everyone gradually got swept up into the story, which they explained with lots of bellowing and hand-waving.

Nikula's face grew darker and darker. As she listened, she fixed me with unseeing eyes. I somehow began confessing what I had done. All of a sudden she became calm and businesslike, as only she could: she herded the frightened girls onto the porch, gave them sweetened valerian-mint tea to drink, made them lie down, wrapped them up and told them not to move. On her way out she locked them in just in case. She chased away the crowd, bolted the gate from the inside and quickly went down into the cellar with two of the workmen. We heard terrible curses and oaths coming from inside.

"May your hands shrivel up!" was the tamest of them.

Afterwards she came back out, walked over to us and said in a steady tone (which was the most frightening part of all): "You two get down there now and get all those creatures out of there. You're not coming out 'til it's done." Then she went to check on the girls.

Rufi and I cleaned the cellar of snakes and grasshoppers until it got dark, but they were still creeping out of everywhere. We cleaned the whole next day, too. Nikula asked us if we were ready.

"No," we said to buy time. "We're gonna have to clean tomorrow, too."

"Tomorrow? What's this 'tomorrow'? Are you crazy? This house better be rid of varmints by this evening! Period. That's the final deadline!" Nikula snapped.

It was getting worse and worse. During those two days all the tourists had left the house.

It was no fun at all down in that cellar. We had totally forgotten by that point how it all had even started. We already regretted having collected so many critters. We wondered what they liked to eat so we could lure out the ones left.

"We could bring some dead rat and leave it here rot and when they come out to eat it, we'll grab 'em," Rufi suggested – he was the king of stupid ideas.

"Yeah right, and who's gonna eat up the stench afterwards?"

I sensed that nothing good awaited me. Nikula wasn't one to forget such things. Especially the tourists' leaving. Ruffi started to lose heart. He laid on the bed in despair, sighing. That was exactly what he did when he got sick of building forts and I had to finish them up myself. By afternoon we'd found only one snake in one of the priss' shoes. They wanted to leave the house immediately after the incident, but grandma had installed them up on the porch and enchanted them with her stories, cooked for them, brought them everything they needed, in the hopes that they'd forget about it by the time we'd cleaned the vermin out of their stuff. We brought everything out into the yard and shook it out piece by piece and put it into a basket hanging on the washbasin. The workmen hungrily eyed the lacey lingerie and whistled. Meanwhile the Czech girls sat on the porch like wet chickens and watched the resuscitation of their belongings from afar. When we finished with their luggage, we went down into the cellar one last time. We turned everything inside out – there was no trace of the critters. At dusk, after grandma had scrutinized everything in the basket and carefully packed it into their suitcases, the Czech girls hightailed it out of our house. On their way out, they glared at us furiously and let fly a string of curses. There was something about *prdel* – Czech for "ass." They told Nikula that they'd never set foot here again as long as they lived and that they'd warn everyone not to stay at Boris and Nikula's because their house was swarming with snakes and lizards.

"Snakes and grasshoppers," my grandma corrected them and angrily slammed the gate in their faces. Then she sent Ruffi home and told him to be ready for the inspection tomorrow.

The next day was a Sunday. There were no tourists or workmen around. Ruffi came over – he didn't abandon me this time. We started the final inspection with Nikula. She walked ahead of us, while we trailed at her heels. We hungrily followed her every move and kept our eyes peeled so if anything jumped out we could catch it quickly before she saw it. First we looked through the upper level, even though there was no way the creatures could've gotten up there. Then we went down into the basement. We hauled out the carpets, the mattresses, the pillows and sheets from all the rooms, but we didn't find a thing. Grandma kept searching in the bathroom and toilet, in the entrance hall. She didn't find anything. We breathed a little easier. Nikula looked disappointed. She dawdled a bit and was just about ready to leave when we saw it. Right on the carpet stairs a single little snake was happily wriggling. Where the heck had it come from?! Ruffi ran to grab it, but Nikula beat him to it. Her face lit up. She went out into the yard, sat down on the bench under the mulberry bush and said: "C'mere you two."

"Auntie Nikula... We... We promise never ever to do it again," Ruffi tried to break the silence in a very serious voice. My grandma paid him no attention whatsoever.

I was silent, because I knew bargaining didn't fly with her.

"Manda, what punishment do you choose?" Nikula asked me in a business-like tone, "Eating this snake alive or getting beaten with nettles?"

I watched the snake squirming in her hands and couldn't answer. I waited to wake up from the nightmare, but on my right I could hear Ruffi's sniveling perfectly clearly. This was no nightmare.

"The nettles."

"Fine."

And Nikula reached towards the mulberry bush where a rope conveniently happened to be hanging and deftly tied me to it. Then she headed towards the garden. Ruffi glanced at the gate. She caught his glance:

"Don't you even think of..."

And he obediently sat back down on the bench, hanging his head.

We were face-to-face with the inevitable.

She soon returned wearing a glove on one hand and holding a fistful of nettles.

"Auntie, I've gotta go home now, my mom's calling me for lunch," Ruffi said timidly.

Grandma turned the huge key to the gate, slipped it into her apron and said:

"You're not getting out of this. You'll stand here and watch, since you're both to blame for this mischief.

That'll be your punishment."

"Please don't, Auntie Nikulaaaa... don't, don't beat her, please," Ruffi was clinging to her apron. I felt a strange sense of resignation.

Nikula pushed him away and started in on me. I was stripped to my underpants as usual. I felt the pain and squeezed my eyes shut so the nettle wouldn't get in them. I heard myself screaming somewhere far away in an unfamiliar, ugly voice that came from deep inside. I was ashamed, but it hurt like hell. Nikula was trying to shout me.

"This'll teach you a thing or two about responsibility! This'll teach you to leave off with this tomfoolery! To have respect for my hard work! To have respect for money! Where am I going to get the money to feed you now, you worthless little rat?! This'll teach you to protect the family name! Yesterday's turd, you shit on my hard work," Nikula screamed, having fallen completely into a trance. I don't remember anything after that.

When I came to, the first thing I heard was a frantic pounding on the gate and Ruffi's cries as he clung to the inside of the gate.

"Nikulaaa, open up, I'm gonna call the police," Nona, Ruffi's mother, yelled from outside.

I didn't feel anything at all, the rope hardly held me, I had peed on myself. Nikula, not completely recovered from her trance, tossed the nettles aside, undid the rope and threw me on the couch on the porch and went to open the gate.

"Are you crazy, woman???" Nona burst in and grabbed her bawling child. "I'm going to file a complaint about you, you better believe it!"

"And I'll inform on that brother of yours who drags sewing machines back from the USSR and sells them. Take your little brat home before I give him a thrashing, too, for the damage they did to me," Grandma struggled to regain her dignity. "Let them fill your house with snakes and see how you like it!"

"But they're just kids, don't you have any mercy?!"

"I didn't touch a hair on your kid's head. Now get out of here before I whup you as well!"

Nikula slammed the gate and bolted it. I crawled into the hall closet and hid under the coats. I had to find a way to save myself before she locked me up.

When she got back to the porch and saw that I wasn't there, Nikula flopped down heavily on the couch. "Devil's spawn. Sofia freak... Where did she pop out of," she whispered exhaustedly and went to look for me in the attic.

Nettle Soup:

Gather only the tips of the nettles. Wash them thoroughly in water. Around a half-kilogram is enough for one liter of water. Let the water come to boil with a pinch of salt and add the nettles. Boil uncovered for five minutes so they don't blacken. Add a bit of butter and mint and serve with feta cheese as desired.

Nettle Purée:

Finely slice one kilogram of nettles and cook in a small amount of water for five minutes at on high and five minutes on low. Brown three tablespoons of flower in a pan until it becomes golden. Add a packet of butter to the flour and gradually combine it with the nettles. Stir the mixture until it becomes a full thick porridge. For a more attractive presentation, it can be served with a fried egg on top and sprinkled with feta cheese, mint and crushed walnuts.

Siemens and the Counterrevolution

I have no clear recollection of how I made it to the monastery. When I came to, I was lying in the mother superior's cell, tightly wound in bandages. My body felt gigantic, pain radiating from everywhere. My eyes were almost swollen shut and I could hardly see Efrosinia sitting next to the bed. Her face was dark and severe. I don't know how long we have been sitting there in silence when we heard a furious pounding on the monastery gate. Voices floated towards us.

"Police! Open up!"

Mother Superior went to open the gate. I managed to sit up. Two green jeeps had stopped in front of the gate and policemen were jumping out of them. Mother superior stood on the threshold and refused to let them in. She was speaking with two hulking fellows, one of whom frequently spent the night at our house when grandpa wasn't there. He was some bigwig from the Fatherland Front and he helped my grandma prepare her speeches. My grandma had a whole notebook full of speeches and would go around to the villages giving them. He shoved mother superior out of the way and came into the courtyard.

"I'll shut down this vipers' nest of renegades," the man shouted.

"Do you have legal cause?" Mother superior tried to remain calm.

"I am the law, I AM, monastic scum!" he screamed.

"What are you charging us with?" Mother superior asked.

"With kidnapping and abuse of a minor. With the development of private business on state land with the goal of personal gain as well as plenty of other things that you'll find out for yourself in court."

"We've done no such thing."

"Yes, you have!" a young woman's voice was heard. Mother superior turned around and examined her with her dark green gaze.

"It's not true," I yelled through the window. At that moment my mother rushed through the gate. She burst into the cell, scooped me up in her arms and carried me outside.

"Wait," I yelled, "she saved me, I came here on my own..." I tried to explain, but clearly for my mother at that moment the most important thing was getting me out of there.

I saw the man putting handcuffs on the nun and forcing her into the other car.

Everything happened quickly. We didn't go back to the house at all. My mother kept me with her at the sanatorium until I got better. It turns out that in the meantime she had fallen in love with Major - at first I thought that was his name, but later it turns out he was an army man being treated at the sanatorium. After a week they released him and we left for his house in Sofia, where they got married and I started school.

Two years later when I went to Nesebar with my mom, I learned that they had shut down the monastery and chased away the nuns. No one knew what had happened to mother superior. I went to the monastery - it was deserted, the church had been looted and dug up by treasure hunters searching for gold hidden beneath the altar. The police had killed my grandfather's dogs and confiscated his buggy, because dogs weren't allowed to pull carts. The monastery gardens had gone to seed.

Nikula no longer made such an effort to "educate" me or to meddle in my mother's life. She didn't dare because of the major. Sometimes our eyes met. I withstood her gaze. I wasn't so afraid of her anymore. It was as if with that last beating part of her strength had been transferred to me. She felt it. And she knew that I knew it, too. I had beaten her. She would never again be that cruel to anyone. Except herself.

Otherwise, everything was as it had been. By May the house was crawling with Czechs. The rooms had already been readied. At dusk the banner of grandma's heroic life was unfurled far and wide for the tourists under the fig tree.

One late afternoon when I came back from the beach I realized that something was going on. Nikula wasn't sitting under the fig tree telling her life story. All the Czechs were crowded into the cellar, in the snake room, as we called it. I could hear their excited voices, shushing and the news in Czech. It was smoky. Grandma was serving coffee, water and brandy. The Czechs were huddled around grandpa's old Siemens radio that he had dragged back from who knows which of his travels, with dark worried expressions - just like mother superior's face as she healed me from the nettles. Grandma sent me out every hour for more brandy and soft drinks.

Counterrevolution had broken out in Czechoslovakia. Soviet and Bulgarian forces were crushing it and people were dying on the squares of Prague. For the next week our house became something of an unofficial headquarters for information about Prague Spring, as they would later call it. Czechs from all over Nesebar showed up.

My grandma was revitalized - surely the situation somehow reminded her of her youth as a brigadier. I sensed their fear. They didn't want to go back at all. They gathered in the courtyard and smoked in silence. A heavy, thick silence. We tiptoed around them. For the first time I felt sorry for the Czechs - until then to me they'd only been puffed-up conquerors of our house. One by one they packed up their luggage and left. The counterrevolution was about as effective as my snakes. My grandmother saw them off. They were crying and hugging at the gate and afterwards she moped dejectedly around the yard. She found her salvation in a new garden near the stadium that they'd given us following the Decree on Self-Sufficiency of the Population.

While our tomatoes ripened in the Nesebar sands, Jan Palach burned in Prague, Vietnam was showered with napalm, in Maryland the birth control pill was approved, in Paris students barricaded the streets and chanted "it is forbidden to forbid," and in America clouds of marijuana covered the hippie movement and Woodstock. It was 1968.